

**First PhD Presentation Topic:**

***An Introduction to Nikolai Medtner's Piano  
Concertos: Aspects of Two-Dimensional Sonata  
Form and Metrotectionics***

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## 1. Who was Nikolai Medtner?

Nikolai Karlovich Medtner (1880-1951) was born in Moscow to parents of German descent. Being a younger contemporary of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, Medtner's art became suppressed by the mystical qualities of the former and the popular appeal of the latter. Medtner often referred to himself as "a pupil of Beethoven" (Martyn 1995). He vividly expressed his "disgust" towards the modernist movement- mainly referring to Schönberg, Stravinsky and Prokofiev. Medtner expressed his views in his book called *THE MUSE AND THE FASHION: Being a defence of the foundation of the Art of Music*<sup>1</sup>, first published in Russian in 1935 and an English translation in 1951. It is an instructive document and is valuable in understanding Medtner's individual aesthetic position and motivations. A lofty idealist, Medtner believed that music should follow basic "laws" established by the masters of the past. He had a Nineteenth-century view of art as an ennobling higher purpose, which acknowledged intervention from the "divine" from both religious (sacred) and pagan (secular) sources,<sup>2</sup> as embodied in the works of great poets such as Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet, Goethe, Heine, Mihail Lermantov, Nietzsch, Pushkin, Shakespeare and Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev.

## 2. A brief history and overview of Medtner's piano concertos

There have been dissertations written on Medtner. However, many of them only focus on his fourteen piano sonatas, which are of course a crucial part of his output. PhD dissertations by Bobby Hughes Loftis (1970), "The piano Sonatas of Nicolai Medtner" and by Charles William Keller (1971), titled "The Piano Sonatas of Nicolas Medtner", offer great insight on research about Medtner. Wendelin Bitzan is currently working on his doctoral dissertation, also focusing on the Medtner's piano sonatas. His recent publications include analytical essays on the *Sonata Triad* and Sonata in G Minor, Opp.11 and 22, and of the *Sonata-Ballade*, Op. 27 by Medtner. A thorough study of Medtner's piano concertos is still lacking. This is why I deem my study an imperative research contribution regarding Medtner's output. Medtner's piano concertos are an important part of his oeuvre of individual formal design connected to the unorthodox treatment of form in his piano sonatas. The three piano concertos are important contributions

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<sup>1</sup> *The Muse and the Fashion* was originally published by Rachmaninoff's publishing company, Tair. It was translated to English by Alfred Swan in 1945 but was only published by Haverford College Bookstore, located in Pennsylvania, in 1951. A copy of the book is available on the following website: <http://www.medtner.org.uk/publications.html>. (Updated 18-12-2017)

<sup>2</sup> That is to say from God and from the muse of Greek mythology. An example of this is *Dithyrambs*, Op. 10 and his *Piano Concerto No.3, Op.60, Ballade*.

to the concerto genre. Although they have been criticized for a certain bleakness in orchestration, it can be argued that their merits far outweigh their deficiencies. In my dissertation I shall attempt to reveal the innovations in Medtner's piano concertos, placing them in the context of both Russian music and the international history of the concerto genre around 1900.

All three piano concertos were premiered by Medtner himself. The First Piano Concerto in C Minor, op. 33 was composed between 1914-18, during World War I, whilst Medtner was still living in Russia. In this concerto, we observe an experimental Medtner - experimental in the sense of attempting to find his "own voice". The concerto is laid out in a single movement and is an original adaptation of multi-dimensional sonata form, falling into three sections equivalent to the movements of a traditional concerto, including a set of variations. The tendency towards an integration of the three movements into a complex one-movement form had been characteristic for the concerto genre at least since Liszt's First Piano Concerto in E-flat Major completed in 1849.

Piano Concerto No. 2, op. 50, also in C Minor, was completed during Medtner's first two years in France, 1925-26, and is dedicated to Rachmaninoff (a gesture which Rachmaninoff reciprocated with his Fourth Piano Concerto, Op. 40, in G Minor from 1926). Medtner's second piano concerto was most likely begun in Russia in 1921 and then abandoned for a few years, before the composer returned to it in 1925. He gave first performance of the work during his Russian tour of 1927. The second concerto, though still employing a multi-dimensional structure, has a somewhat of a more conventional form divided into three movements: Toccata, Romanza, and Divertimento and was described as "a compound of the classical and romantic styles" by Richard Holt.

The Third Piano Concerto, in E Minor, op. 60, subtitled "Ballade", was composed in England between 1941-43. Thus, like the first concerto, it was composed during a world war. In contrast to the first concerto, however, the third concerto appears to be removed from the influences of the external or the physical. It, instead, is infused with imaginative and metaphorical content. Like the first concerto, third concerto has three connected movements: *Con moto largamente*; *Interludium: Allegro, molto sostenuto, misterioso*, and *Finale: Allegro molto, Svegliando, eroico*. The *Interludium* is a brief introduction to the *Finale*. According to Medtner's own programme notes for a recital in England, the concerto's first movement is

connected to Lermontov's ballade Rusalka ("The Mermaid"). However, Medtner did voice concerns about the imposition of an overly definitive programme to this concerto.

### **3. Theoretical approaches to Medtner's music**

Medtner's three piano concertos (Opp. 33, 50 and 60) present structural and architectural difficulties. It became crucial to explore methods and theories that would best assist in clarifying the inherent formal and structural complexities of these works. After Beethoven's middle period, the composition of large-scale and monumental musical forms became increasingly problematic. Two-dimensional sonata form – which resulted from this historical juncture and attempted to integrate single-movement sonata form with the sonata cycle – in a way expresses the impossibility of the unbroken large form after Beethoven. However, the combination of the movements of a sonata cycle with the sections of a sonata form engenders tension between both dimensions (movement and cycle), which becomes palpable, for example, movements of the cycle are interpolated in the form such as the Scherzo and the Adagio in Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony op 9 (1906). Moortele ascertains that "although composers relentlessly attempted to solve this tension, it never entirely disappeared: the complete integration of both dimensions in a two-dimensional sonata form failed" (2009: 199). This "heroic failure to integrate sonata form and sonata cycle is...not a shortcoming; it is the hallmark of its historical position" (ibid: 202). This tension highlights my main research question: How did Medtner achieve formal unity and overcome formal and structural problems and impasses in his piano concertos, presuming that he was well aware of them? To tackle this question, my dissertation shall pursue a threefold method:

1. Firstly, I shall map out theoretical as well as philosophical aspects of Medtner's composing, aiming to dismantle key terms to which Medtner referred to, such as the "immutable" laws of harmony, function, beauty and equilibrium of music.
2. Secondly, I shall situate Medtner's formal and structural design to contemporary Russian theories of form and tonality, thus aiming at a historically sensitive interpretation of his idiosyncratic musical style.
3. Lastly, I shall shed light on intertextual relationships between Medtner's concertos and works of other composers both contemporaries (in particular Rachmaninoff) and the "masters of the past" (specifically Bach and Beethoven), aiming at revealing techniques through which Medtner wrote himself into the nineteenth-century tradition he considered as being primary.

I shall now introduce the second aspect of my method in some more detail by shortly demonstrating how the theories of two twentieth-century Russian music scholars may be applied to Medtner's music:

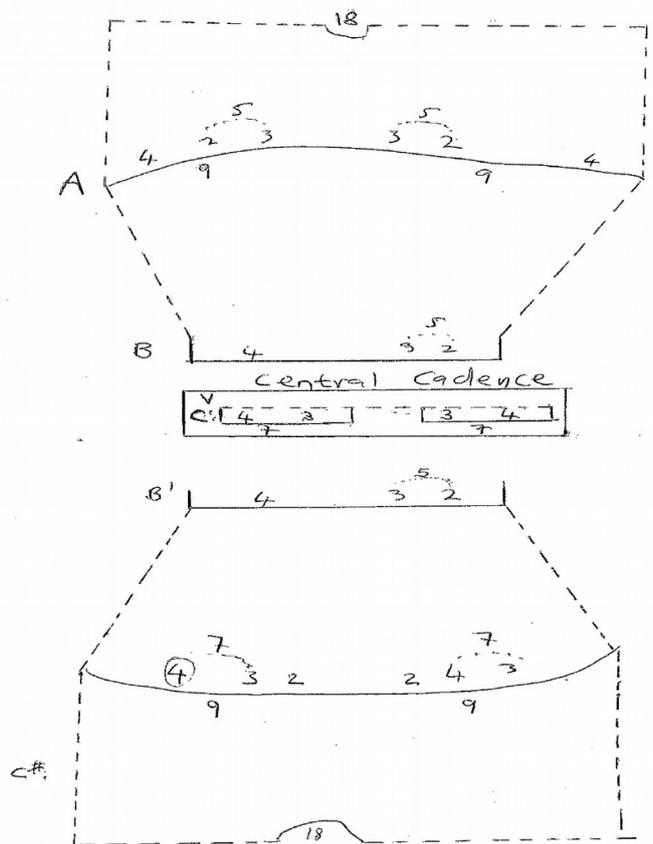
1. In his book, Medtner emphasizes the "law of coordination into unity" according to which the basic elements (meanings) of music always exist in pairs, which are possibly arranged in a symmetrical manner. This concept is in agreement to the theory of *metrotectonicism* put forward in lectures dating from 1919 and a 1924 treatise by Georgi Eduardovich Conius (1862-1933), one of Medtner's previous teachers at the Moscow Conservatory.

The term *Metrotectonicism* means, "measure construction", derived from the Greek words *metron* (measure) and *tektonikos* (constructor or builder). Fundamental to a metrotectonic analysis is the "the discovery of the temporal coordinate (symmetry in time), to which the structure of any musical work is unconsciously subordinated", revealing the temporal relationships within parts, between parts, and between the parts and the whole, all more or less symmetrical. Its basic principle has two aspects:

- a. A graphic representation of a musical composition highlighting all segments of its form, notated according to temporal size, to be seen at once.

Example. 1 shows a numeric metrotectonic graph of Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 2, op. 27 in C-sharp minor:

Konius numeric metrotectonic graph  
 Beethoven: Piano Sonata, C-sharp minor, OP 27, no. 2.  
 Figure 1a



- b. The patterns that these schemes exhibited showed that each composition, or at least each movement of a composition, was inherently symmetrical. See Example. 2.

Example. 2: Beethoven: Piano Sonata no. 2, op. 27 in C-sharp minor:

Beethoven      Figure 1b

НОТНЫЙ ПЛАН АДАЖИО СОСТЕНУТО СОНАТЫ БЕТХОВЕНА ОП. 27 № 2

SONATE  
DA 1807

same motive  
in 1st mov.

242

ct# minor

In my next presentation, I shall provide a detailed metrotectonic analysis of Medtner's First Piano Concerto including audio examples.

In agreement with Medtner, Conius argues that the important idea behind the metrotectonic division of a work into symmetrical parts is not so much revealing a "hidden" construction of

metrical units but rather observing the relationship of parts to one another and the whole of the work. "...I want to try and indicate, schematically, the general law of coordination into unity which has not been put down by musical theory, but which undoubtedly governs the whole macrocosm of music. It brings into close relationship all the individual phenomena of our art. It governs the process of artistic creation" (Medtner 1945: 11-12).

2. I shall also explore Yury Nikolaevich Tuilin (1893-1978) in my study where deemed necessary. Tuilin argued that even in music, for which traditional analysis seemed sufficient, a re-evaluation from the standpoint of "mode" would be beneficial. He put forward a comprehensive theory of modally influenced tonality beginning dated from 1925. In 1937, Tuilin received his doctorate for his dissertation, *A Study of Harmony*, which was published in 1939. Tuilin's theory can likely shed light on the harmonic organization in Medtner's piano concertos. Even though Medtner distanced himself from folkloristic tendencies, Carpenter argues that Tuilin touched upon so many different areas that it is difficult to find a theoretical work written subsequently in the Soviet Union that does not include- acknowledged or not- some aspects of Tuilin's work (2009: 358).

#### **4. Conclusion and Prospects**

My task for the year ahead is to meticulously analyse all of Medtner's piano concertos employing the methods I have mentioned in this presentation. I shall aim to answer the following questions:

1. How did Medtner achieve formal unity and overcome formal and structural problems and impasses in his piano concertos, presuming that he was well aware of them?
2. Which aspects of intertextuality are prevalent in Medtner's piano concertos?

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